

# Archaeology at the Sharp End of the Trowel

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Archaeology at the sharp end of the trowel is about the conjunction between archaeology and politics. It is not about the “intrusion” of politics or about the misuse of archaeology for “political purposes.” Rather, it is about the mutual implication of the archaeological and the political. It is about archaeology as one of the languages or registers in which politics is conducted, and it is about politics as an inescapable aspect of many archaeological projects—woven into the fabric rather than added on through malignant intent.

Arguably, this is more the case today than ever before. A number of writers have commented on the manner in which the politics of grand narratives and big ideas has given way in the post-1990 period to the micropolitics of identity and ethnicity. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2003), with typical brio, have described this as a move from the politics of ideology to the politics of “I.D.-ology.” Stuart Hall (1992) has discussed this in terms of the “return of ethnicity” in late modernity, an unanticipated return that took the major theorists of modernity by surprise. The point is that in the context of the politics of I.D.-ology, archaeology—with its promise of revealing deep cultural roots and grounded identities—provides a potent set of materials for thinking through issues of culture and identity in contemporary society. Archaeological sites and materials become sites of contestation and occasion complex plays of interest in the working out of local identity politics and more global pressures and dynamics.

Recently in Cape Town, South Africa, the exhumation of an early colonial burial site off Prestwich Street, close to the Waterfront, the city’s glitzy international zone, became the occasion for a bitterly fought public campaign. This pitted human biologists, archaeologists, and heritage managers against an alliance of community activists, spiritual leaders, and First Nations representatives. Organised as the Hands Off Prestwich Street Committee, they argued passionately and eloquently that the burial ground should be preserved with its remains intact as a site of conscience and memorial to slavery and the poor of the area. When their initial arguments failed, they mobilised tactics from the antiapartheid struggle, including mass meetings, marches, vigils, and poetry readings, in a bid to halt the exhumations. For their part, archaeologists

generally defended the exhumations on the ground of the priority of science and the potential of archaeology as a route to recovering hidden histories. Ultimately, the Hands Off Committee failed in their bid to halt the exhumations. A luxury apartment block is currently under construction on the Prestwich Street site. In one of the bitter ironies of globalisation, these are described as “New York–style” loft apartments reminiscent of the jazz era of the 1920s and 1930s, and the advertising blurb is full of references to “spirit,” “soul,” and “harmony.”

Prestwich Street has been the most contested instance of archaeological work in South Africa since the political transition of 1994. It has also been damaging to the discipline of archaeology locally, insofar as archaeologists were perceived to be disengaged from contemporary social and political concerns and unaccountable to a broader public. The lessons of Prestwich Street are clear: In the context of the politics of I.D.-ology there can be no alternative to an informed and thoughtful engagement with the currents of contemporary life and with what might be termed the “necessary entanglements” of life in the postcolony. The sharp end of the trowel is never a comfortable place to be. On the other hand, as the many archaeologists working in fields like public archaeology and Indigenous Archaeology have learnt, it can be a source of renewal for those willing to accept the challenge.



In this issue we publish a further set of papers concerned with the future of WAC and the One World Archaeology movement. Authors were invited to write short, punchy papers under the heading of “Twenty Years On: One World Archaeology Today.” Beverley Butler, Cristóbal Gnecco, Cornelius Holtorf, and Dorothy Lippert took up the challenge.

## References Cited

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